CHAPTER I

Introduction

Poetry, in both the Oriental and the Occidental traditions down the ages, has often preoccupied itself with the self. It has focused on identity, ego, relationships, personality and divinity among other facets of human understanding and experience. Poetry has been a means of experience and also a means of recreating experience in and through language. The self that is thus probed in poetry is not a homogeneous entity but takes on different shades in the hands of different poets. It could be an expansive and mystical self, a religio-ethical self or an anguished, conflict-torn self. It is this understanding of the self as an afflicted, suffering being which is projected in confessional poetry – both American and Indian. Poetry, to the confessionalists, can be both a complex and empowering experience.

This dissertation argues that though common elements of confessionalism are present in both the American and the Indian tradition, significant differences arise in the handling of the confessional mode because of the difference in the social, cultural and literary contexts. The poetry of Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia are taken as primary material to prove the hypothesis.

The dissertation begins with a brief historical sketch of the American and Indian English poetic traditions, with the objective of placing the confessional poets within their respective traditions. The shifting paradigms of the self, within these traditions, are also
explored in the first chapter. In the next two chapters an attempt is made for a rigorous analysis of the themes dealt with and the techniques employed by the two poets, Anne Sexton and Mamta Kalia. In the fourth chapter a comparative study of the poetry of the two poets with a view to identify the complex commonalities and critical differences between them is attempted.

Since a brief sketch of the poetic traditions the two poets under consideration belonged to is important for understanding the birth and growth of confessionalism, the two sections that follow give an overview of American and Indian English poetry respectively.

**AN OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN POETRY**

American poetry had its origin in the rich oral traditions of Native American cultures. Each of these cultures developed complex symbolic tales of the origins and history of its people, akin to epic poems in the European tradition. These tales were performed as part of rituals and were passed on through oral tradition from one generation to the next. Some of them have been translated into English. Yet these works do not figure in most histories of American poetry as these histories only recorded White contributions. Other cultures such as Spanish poetry which has been produced in America from the time of the earliest Spanish explorers to current Hispanic and Chicano poetry have also contributed to the rich heritage of American poetry. The American poetic tradition also thrived in many other linguistic cultures from Chinese to Yiddish, as a result of centuries of immigration to the United States.
In the 1600s, poets from the continent responded to the challenges of their new world and expressed the hopes and fears of Europeans who settled there. In the years following the declaration of Independence (1776) American poets created patriotic poetry as a defining literature for the new nation. A powerful new kind of poetry flowered in the mid and late nineteenth century among the first poets to be born and raised as actual citizens of the United States. American modernist poetry emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, as poets shifted from the idea poetry as a shared national or communal experience with well-defined aesthetic and political positions to poetry as individualized statements of deeply personal experience. Finally, in the second half of the twentieth century a multiplicity of voices, foregrounding varied cultural experiences, have redefined American poetry.

Puritans, who had settled in New England in the early decades of the Seventeenth Century, were the first poets of the American colonies. Most Puritan poets saw the purpose of poetry as careful Christian examination of their lives; and Puritan poems, like Puritan diaries, served as a forum where the self could be measured daily against devout expectations. Puritan leaders deemed poetry a safe and inspiring genre, since they considered the Bible itself to be God’s poetry. Thus, poetry became the literary form that allowed devout believers to express their spiritual experiences, which served as sources of moral pleasure. Other genres, such as drama and fiction, were considered dangerous, capable of generating lies and leading to idle entertainment instead of moral uplift.
The Puritan poets, who hailed from Britain, considered John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) the Christian epic poem, the highest literary achievement. When they settled in America they maintained their cultural allegiance to Britain. In fact, from the beginning until well into the 19th century, widespread agreement existed that American poetry would be judged by British standards and that poetry written in America was simply British poetry composed on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Anne Bradstreet looked to British poets like Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spencer for a literary model. Edward Taylor looked to poets like George Herbert and John Donne who celebrated in their poetry the evolution from body-consciousness to an awareness of the divine nature of the soul. Anne Bradstreet’s *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung in America* was published in England in 1650. Bradstreet had lived in England until 1630, when at the age of 18 she arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, where she spent the rest of her life. Although Bradstreet wrote many poems on familiar British themes and produced skilled imitations of British forms, her most remarkable works responded directly to her experiences in colonial New England. They reveal her attraction to her new world, even as the discomforts of life in the wilderness sickened her. Her works also record early stirrings of female resistance to a social and religious system in which women are subservient to men.

Edward Taylor, a poet of great technical skill, wrote powerful meditative poems in which he tested himself morally and sought to identify and root out sinful tendencies. In *God’s Determinations Touching His Elect* (1682), one of Taylor’s most important works, he celebrates God’s power in the triumph of good over evil in the human soul. All of Taylor’s and much of Bradstreet’s poetry were personal in the sense their audience often consisted of
themselves, their family and closest friends. This tradition of private poetry, kept in manuscript and circulated among a small and intimate circle, continued throughout the colonial period, and numerous poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remained unknown to the general public until 1939, when *The Poetical Works* of Edward Taylor appeared. Many of Bradstreet’s most personal poems also remained unpublished during her lifetime. Public poetry, for the Puritans, was more didactic in nature and often involved the transformation into verse of important biblical lessons that guided Puritan belief. Poet and Minister Michael Wigglesworth wrote theological verse in ballad meter, such as *The Day of Doom* (1662), which turned the *Book of Revelation* into an easily memorized sing-song epic. Puritan poetry also included elaborate elegies, or poems honoring a person who had recently died. Puritans used these poems to explore the nature of the self, reading the character of the dead person as a text and seeing life as a collection of hidden meanings.

Colonial poets of the eighteenth century still looked up to British poets of their time, such as Alexander Pope and Ambrose Philips. Both were masters of pastoral verse poetry that dealt with English countryside and rural life in satirical verse. Initially, this satiric tone was more prevalent in the southern colonies than in New England. Two poets from the Maryland Colony, Ebenezer Cook and Richard Lewis, wrote accomplished satirical poems based on British pastoral models. But their poems cleverly undermine those models by poking fun at the British. Cook’s *The Sot-weed Factor* (1708) is a long narrative poem written in rhyming couplets that mocks Americans as backward people but aims its satire most effectively at the poem’s narrator, who is a British snob.
A group of poets who were associated with Yale University, which included poets like David Humphreys, John Trumbull and Joel Barlow, known as the Connecticut Wits, continued the trend of writing satires. Along with other writers they produced *The Anarchical* (1786-1787), a mock epic poem warning against the chaos that would ensue if a strong central government, as advocated by the Federalists, was not installed in the United States. American poets used the British literary model of the mock epic as a tool to satirize and criticize British culture. Trumbull’s mock epic *M’Fingal* (1775-1782) lampooned the British Loyalists during the Revolution.

Apart from satires, the Revolutionary era poets felt the urgency to produce serious, monumental poetry that would celebrate the country’s new democratic ideals. In order to glorify the new nation’s culture, these poets, who were basically professionals like lawyers and ministers, chose the epic form as they were also well-versed in traditional epics. While conventional epic poems celebrated past accomplishments of a civilization, American epics such as Barlow’s *The Vision of Columbus* (1787), later revised as *The Columbiad* (1807), *Greenfield Hill* (1794) by Clergyman Timothy Dwight, and *The Rising Glory of America* (1772) by Philip Freneau celebrated the future of America.

Philip Freneau, a New York poet, was known for his patriotic fervor and his poetry focused more on America’s future greatness. His lyric poems as *The Wild Honey Suckle* (1786) and *On a Honey Bee* (1809) can be seen as the first expressions in American poetry of a deep spiritual engagement with nature.
The practice of slavery went against the foremost ideology of the new nation that all men are created equal. Many of the country’s early leaders believed that African slaves were intellectually inferior to the Whites. Phillis Wheatley, a Boston slave who was brought to America and educated by her masters, published her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) in England which expressed her frustration at enslavement and a desire to reach Heaven where her color and social position would no longer keep her from singing in her full glory.

Wheatley’s Poetry, along with that of other slaves, begins a powerful African American tradition in American poetry. In 1749, Lucy Terry, a slave in Massachusetts who was also educated by her owner, wrote the first poem to be published by an African American. The poem ‘Bar’s Fight’, which was not published until 1855, describes the victims and survivors of a native American raid against settlers. It was followed by Jupiter Hammoms’ biblically inspired *An Evening Thought and Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries*. Born at the time of the founding of the nation, African American poetry retained its concern with the burning issues of the American Revolution, including liberty, equality and identity. It also expressed African American experiences of divided loyalties as the Blacks were unsure of the treatment meted out to them by the Whites in America.

The nineteenth century began with high hopes for poetic accomplishment. The first comprehensive anthologies of American poetry appeared in the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s. The years between 1830 and 1870, commonly known as “The American Renaissance”, saw not only the publication of more books by American writers than ever before but also a great
expansion of the reading public. In the first half of the century, poets sought to record America’s history, myths and manners in order to compete with British poetry.

But by the mid nineteenth century the new goal for American Poetry was to create something very different from British poetry. Innovative poets such as Emerson, Thoreau, Poe and Whitman led the way. Transcendentalism, the most individualistic movement in American history, had two chief practitioners, namely, Emerson and Thoreau. “It was in Transcendentalist writing that the three traditions – Spiritual self-examination, romantic self-consciousness, and democratic individualism – converged for the first time in American history, with the result that the self became a more important entity for the Transcendentalists than for any of their forbears” (Baell 267). The Transcendentalists believed that man and nature were entities of inherent goodness, and that human beings were corrupted by social institutions, especially education. They believed in the infinite reservoir of spiritual possibilities in man. The Self, to the Transcendentalists, was expansive, an “over-soul.”

While literary transcendentalism was creating waves amongst the intellectuals, there came into existence a new group of popular poets namely William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russel Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes and John Greenleaf Whittier who were nicknamed “the Fireside Poets” as they frequently used the hearth as an image of comfort and unity, a place where families gathered to learn and tell stories. It was Bryant who gained recognition first for his Thanatopsis, published in 1821 but written when he was a teenager. He wrote elegant and romantic descriptions of Nature to the extent that “his countrymen looked upon him as the father of American Poetry.” (Hubbell 15).
Longfellow, the first American poet to be honored with a bust in the revered poets corner of Westminster Abbey, was known for his *Evangeline* (1847) and *The Son of Hiawatha* (1885). The accomplishment of other fire side poets were various. Lowell’s *Biglow Papers* (1848) added to the American tradition of long satirical poems. Holmes wrote several memorable short poems such as the *Chambered Nautilus* (1858) and Whittier was best known for *Snow-Bound* (1866).

The nineteenth century also saw Black and White poets who wrote about the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of slaves. The notable black poets are George Moses Horton and Joshua McCarter Simpson whose memorable songs of emancipation were set to popular tunes sung by fugitive slaves. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper wrote passionate abolitionist and early feminist poems and James M. Whitfield wrote powerful poems like *America* (1853) criticizing the country for its failure to live up to its ideals. Amongst the white abolitionist poets Whittier, Longfellow and Lowell were considered to be staunch abolitionists who championed the cause of Blacks in their poetry.

In 1855 Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the book he would revise and expand for the rest of his life. The longest poem, “Song of Myself,” constructs a democratic ‘I’, a voice that sets out to celebrate itself and in so doing, to celebrate the unfettered potential of every individual in a democratic society.

Another highly original poet along with Whitman was Emily Dickinson. Her nearly 2,000 short, untitled poems displayed imperfect rhymes, subtle break of rhythm and
idiosyncratic syntax. Many of her poems record moments of freezing paralyses that could be death, pain, doubt, fear and love.

Lydia Huntley Sigourney was a popular early nineteenth century poet whose work set out themes like motherhood and the ever-present threat of death, particularly to children. There were also other women poets like Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Frances Sargent Locke Osgood, Slice and Phoebe Cary and Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt who wrote on love, marriage and motherhood.

Others poets who tried out distinctive new forms include Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville, a careful craftsman. Poe invented nightmarish scenes and unnerving plots which gave his poems a haunting memorable quality. Basically a novelist, Herman Melville also wrote powerful poetry about the Civil War, collected in Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War (1886). Minor poets like Jones Very, Sidney Lanier, Henry Timrod, William Vaughan Moody and Stephen Crane also contributed to American Poetry in their own unique ways.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, American poetry had entered into a period of regionalism, exploring the stories, dialects and idiosyncrasies of the many regions of the United States. Paul Lawrence Dunbar was one of the black dialect poets whose Oak and Ivy (1893) and Majors and Minors (1895) romanticized the life of slaves in the pre-Civil War South. Edgar Lee Masters’ Spoon River Anthology (1915) and Edwin Arlington Robinson’s dramatic monologues were popular additions to dialect poetry.
Robert Frost, popularly known as the American Wordsworth, is hailed as one of the literary signposts of early twentieth century American poetry. Restrained, humorous and understated, Frost’s poetry gives voice to modern psychological constructions. His observations of New England life have an edge of skepticism. “Frost’s originality lies in his revealing, concealing kind of poetry” (Wiman 538) and his poems bear the unmistakable mark of someone who was fully living the particular tensions in his time. “I had a lover’s quarrel with the world”, he wrote late in his life (536).

America witnessed huge industrial expansion in the early twentieth century as a result of which materialism crept into its culture. It affected many writers to the extent that they moved out of their motherland and wrote most of their poetry as expatriates in Europe. Among the expatriates were Ezra Pound, Hilda Doolittle, T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein. Those who stayed in the United States included William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Langston Hughes and Robinson Jeffers.

The early twentieth century poets carried on what is called the Whitman tradition for they wrote in free verse – a rhythm that responds to the specific subject instead of adhering to a predetermined, set meter. Carl Sandburg in his The People, Yes (1936) actually shifted away from Whitman’s focus on individual identity to a new concern with social identity. Vachel Lindsay introduced a new form of mass participatory poetry called ‘the higher vaudeville”, performances in which he led large groups of people in chanting his poems. Langston Hughes, the century’s most important Black writer, wrote socially conscious poems
and also used the rhythmic structure of Blues music and the improvisational rhythms of Jazz in his innovative development of Whitman’s ideas.

William Carlos Williams looked to Whitman as the source of his own American rhythms, which he claimed to pick up from listening to Americans talk on the streets. William’s massive poem, Paterson (1946-58), released in five volumes, is an epic about Paterson. Early in his career he belonged to a group led by Ezra Pound called the Imagists. The Imagists strove for new rhythms, clear and strapped down images, free choice of subject matter, concentrated or compressed poetic expression and use of common speech.

Each of the Imagists adopted his or her own style. While Williams found his new rhythms in everyday speech, Pound sought his new rhythms in adaptations in English of Chinese, Greek and other poetic traditions. Pound’s Personae (1909) demonstrated his remarkable ability to write intense, beautiful experimental verse, echoing poems from other languages. But Pound took a new direction in his The Cantos in which he built brief Imagist poems into a jagged collage that eventually became a massive long poem. Thus the chief Imagist poets such as Ezra Pound, Williams, and Hilda Doolittle gave up Imagism but Imagism continued to influence later poets like Amy Lowell.

Hilda Doolittle, whose Sea Garden Poems (1916) was acknowledged by Pound as the movement’s signature book, actually started writing long poems like The Walls do not Fall (1944), Tribute to Angles (1945) and The Flowering of the Rod (1946).
An important outcome of Pound’s attempt to build long poems out of Imagist fragments was his editing of The Waste Land (1922) by T.S. Eliot. For many readers this poem ranks as the great statement of despair in the aftermath of World War I (1914 – 1918). Eliot, born in St. Louis, Missouri, eventually became a British Citizen and joined the Church of England. His Ash Wednesday (1930) and Four Quartets (1943) relate to his spiritual concerns.

The erudite poetry of Eliot was not acceptable to many poets like Williams and Hart Crane. While Williams saw his own Paterson as a kind of answer to Eliot’s poetry, Hart Crane challenged Eliotian pessimism by writing his epic-length, The Bridge (1930).

Robinson Jeffers wrote some of the bleakest poetry in all of American literature from his isolated home in California. His bitter vision, a kind of post-waste land, is of a cold natural world that would be better off cleansed of humanity. With no hope of redemption, Jeffer’s poetry anticipates the dark tones of the kind of science fiction that imagines the world after ecological or nuclear holocaust.

Some of the modernist poets showed the influence of Dadaism and Surrealism, the European movements that undermined and mocked the values and traditions of art as they experimented with from and language. One such poet, e e Cummings, wrote highly experimental poems which revealed the fracturing of poetic forms. Gertrude Stein, another radical innovator of modern poetry, probed how language ultimately refers only to itself, not to things of the world, thus becoming self-reflexive.
Marianne Moore also wrote experimental poems which showed a distanced observation of animals and other objects. Wallace Stevens began publishing his poetry late in life and his work forms a mature reflection on the mind’s relation to the world. According to Stevens, poetry or any art creates a meaningful order and pattern in life, an order we accept even while recognizing that it is artificiality improved by humankind.

John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren formed an influential group of poets from the South whose focus was on poetry as a well-on wrought cornice. Their work led to what came to be called New Criticism, a way of reading literature as autonomous, autotelic, ahistorical and apolitical.

By the 1950s most of the major modernists seldom produced innovative work and no longer had any interest in continuing to lead a poetic revolution. As observed by Daniel Hoffman in his “Poetry After Modernism”, “….. American Poets, like their fellow countrymen in other fields, are tinkerers, much of their energy has gone into refining or devising poetic contraptions that work on new principles, hence open up interesting possibilities to the imagination intent on making verbal models of states of feelings” (440).

The poets of the 1950s and 1960s formed the middle generation of twentieth century American Poetry. Several came to be known as ‘Confessional Poets’ as they used intimate, personal details as the subject of their poetry. John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke and Anne Sexton were the prominent confessionalists. Theodore Roethke’s The Lost Son (1948), The Waking (1953) and The Far Field (1964), displayed his creativity which found expression in sudden jots of mood, broken phrases and thudding
repetitions and “more than any other formalist of his time, he recapitulated America’s major poetic traditions and sowed the seeds of 1960s Confessionalism” (Kiernan 113).

Lowell undertook such explorations in his *Life Studies* (1959), Berryman in *Dream Songs* (1964-1968) Anne Sexton in *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) and Sylvia Plath in *Ariel* (1966). The poems in these collections tracked psychological breakdowns and a number of confessional poets, including Sexton and Plath, took their own lives. Sexton’s and Plath’s poetry had another dimension too, as their poetry questioned the traditional roles society assigned to women. In other words, both these poets deal with both the personal and the gendered “I”. Dealing with harrowing personal experiences brought them the realization that individual identity is largely determined by social institutions, especially the institution of marriage, founded on patriarchal constructs of gender.

Muriel Rukeyser was also a key poet whose poetry looks at labour problems and larger class issues. A contemporary of the confessional poets, she is known for her commitment to social justice. Another poet who is equally hard to categorize is Elizabeth Bishop. She was as intense an observer of exotic and common things as her mentor, Marianne Moore.

Adrienne Rich, a contemporary of Plath and Sexton, offers through her poems a serious examination of motherhood and of what it means to be a woman in America. Her first collection, *A Change of World* (1951), reveals her anger as a woman who questions the roles assigned to women by the androcentric world.
W.S. Merwin, an admirer of Pound’s early work, wrote remarkable poetry in the traditional forms in the 1950s. However, in *The Moving Target* (1963), he suddenly abandoned punctuation and created a haunting, prophetic voice devoid of conventional techniques. In his later book *The Lice* (1967), he addressed societal ills, including the prospect of ecological disaster as a result of human irresponsibility.

American poetry became less formal and more political during the 1960s, as America faced the social turbulence of the Civil Rights movement and protest against the Vietnam War (1959-1975). It gave rise to several experimental schools like the Black Mountain School of poets whose members were Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and Ed Doen. Olson developed a theory of poetry called “Projective Verse”, which called for poets to return to an organic basis for their form. He urged an open form that would allow poetry to be a process of discovery.

In 1955 the poet Allen Ginsberg read his poem “Howl” in San Francisco which gave rise to the Beat Generation Writers. It eventually attracted poets like Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso and Gary Snyder. Madness, anguish and suicide, which were to become the dominant themes of confessional poetry, are explored with searching intensity by these poets. Initially dismissed as unpoetical by most academics – primarily because of the reigning notions of universality and a rarefied aesthetic world regarding poetry – the Beat Poets eventually became the most widely read American poets.

From 1960, an explosive new plurality prospered in American poetry resulting in variety. The Black Arts movement was one such which promoted African American poetry
to the extent that even the 1920s and early 1930s Black writers like Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Jean Toomer, Jame Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Sterling Brown, Arna Bontemps, Melvin Tolson and Jessie Fauset became popular. In fact, the 1960s’ Black poetry adopted a more confrontational style than that of early Black poetry and desired to be a distinctive voice of the Black community.

Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize for poetry, had, since 1945, written poems about people living in squalid conditions in American cities like Chicago but with the Black Arts movement of the 1960s, she redefined her poetic mission, writing more directly for a Black audience. Leroi Jones, who later adopted the name Amiri Baraka, was the central figure of the movement. He specifically rejected Eliot and the modernists, and embraced the chanting, rebellious voices of Whitman, Williams and the Beat poets. Later on, Black poetry turned to the ghettos of the Black communities for its language and to the powerful traditions of African American Jazz, Blues and Rock music for its rhythms.

Another direction away from modernism led to “Deep Image” poetry, a name given to the work of Robert Bly, James Wright, Galway Kinnell and others who were born in the 1920s. These poets rejected what they saw as capitalism’s sterile public façade and turned to what Bly called a “deep inwardness”, looking to internal spiritual sources that lie deep within the self and taking leaps into the unconscious to the relatively mysterious, disturbing and often healing images.
John Ashberry and Frank O’Hara wrote a wildly experimental poetry that derived from Dada and from an embrace of Whitman’s credo to keep moving and to celebrate change, instability and chance. These poets were called New York Poets.

Towards the last decades of the twentieth century, American poetry came to be increasingly influenced by various cultural traditions. Asian American writers turned to poetry as a means of exploring both their integration into American culture and their growing sense of distinctive ethnic identity within that culture. Garrett Hong, Alan Chong Lau, John Yau, and Cathy Song are a few remarkable poets whose works expand the definition of Asian American poetry.

Chicano and Chicana Poetry – the male and the female traditions of Chicano poetry – also has a long history in America and the chief writers like Jose’ Montoya, Rudolfo Araya, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cherrie Morago, Benjamin Alire, Saenz, and Gary Sorto blended poetry and prose, Spanish and English, and oral and written traditions.

Native American writers at work today ground their work in the long-standing traditions and oral cultures of their people. As with Chicano and Chicana writers, some Native American poets wrote in English early in the nation’s history. But most Native American poetry in English is of relatively recent origin.

With the growth and reach of modern technology, American poetry in the twenty first century has entered what is perhaps its most prolific period. The internet and its electronic environment are also altering the forms of poetry. Online poetry journals have become
prolific, making both traditional and radically new kinds of poetic expression possible. This work is sometimes grouped under the category of “New Media Poetry”.

In recent years new forms continue to emerge that further connect poetry with its early oral roots. David Antix has been described as a “talk poet” whose performances mix comedy, storytelling, and poetry in intriguing ways. And modern Rap music artists produce dazzling works employing rhyme and rhythm, building on a largely African American tradition of urban poetry linked to Black music. All of these developments show how the words of many poems today are not written on a page, but are sung, recited, improvised, cast into motion, and otherwise actively performed.

For Walt Whitman to have great poets there must also be great audiences. This statement holds good in the context of twentieth century American Poetry especially as there were several movements each of which moved in its own direction addressing the concerns of different groups of people. “Contemporary American poetry can be understood as a series of attempts to reinterpret the relation of man’s inner world to the perceptual universe” (Malkoff 3).

AN OVERVIEW OF INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY

Indians have been writing poetry in English for several decades now. Indian English poetry emerged as “an offshoot as well as recordation” of the Indian Renaissance (Iyengar x). According to one estimate, “The story of Indian poetry in English begins in 1830, with
Kashiprasad Ghose, who called himself the ‘first Hindoo who has ventured to publish a
volume of English poems’” (Contemporary Indian English Verse 27). Even earlier, however, in 1827, Henry Derozio had published his Poems, which initiated Indian English
poetry, modeled on Romantic and Victorian literature in England. As Iyer observes, “Their
themes were mostly Indian though their models were English poets and their poems were
soaked in Romantic exuberance and Victorian sentimentalism” (9). After independence, however, Indian poetry shifted to “such colonial and nationalistic themes as the reuniting of
legends, praise of peasants and from general ethical statement (of Pre-Independence period)
to writing about personal experience” (Modern Indian English Poetry 147). Poet after poet
has striven to give expression to his/her thoughts and feelings, visions and aspirations.

Creativity usually issues out of an unconscious but sustained and determined attention
to one’s own experience, one’s own locality and personal socio-political environment. Hence
the chapter makes an attempt to study briefly the emergence of Indian English poetry as it
would reveal how the various factors have shaped, groomed and influenced Mamta Kalia, the
other poet chosen for the study.

Historical situations create cultural consequences. When the British came to India as
rulers they introduced the teaching of English in schools and colleges mainly for
administrative purposes. But “many educated Indians have adopted English as their most
efficient mode of intellectual expression, as a result of which there has evolved not only a
special Indian English but a very respectable body of Indo-English literature” (Raman 140).
There were, of course, some poets who considered English as the tour de force of their poetic
articulation. As Lotika Basu observes, “English, after the days of Macaulay, formed the main subject of the curriculum of Indian Universities. English was not only the language of the ruling class but a language understood by half the world. Every ambitious versifier, therefore, hoping to acquire world fame, wrote in English” (142).

In fact, English proved to be the window to the world. English educated writers became familiar with a galaxy of profound thinkers and literary giants. Paul Verghese examines the impact of English on the Indian mind in these words: “Not only he gained access to the immense wealth of English literature but his knowledge of English also led him through the corridors of other European literatures and helped him to study the works of literary artists of the first rank such as Chekov, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Emile Zola, Balzac and Flaubert” (13).

The fascination for English Literature is obvious from the fact that the people who could have turned out to be naturally gifted poets in their mother tongue tried their hands at English poetry. As V.K. Gokak comments, “Indo-Anglian Poetry was born under a Romantic Star. It learned to lisp in the manner of Byron and Scott in the verse of Derozio, M.M.Dutt and others. It began with the verse-romances and lyrics written in Romantic vein” (19). But they also felt that there was much stuff for poetry in Indian life and history, religion and philosophy, folk literature and mythology. They derived inspiration from both the British and the Indian traditions. Hence they would at times imitate Milton and at times fall back upon Kalidasa. “The poetry of the nineteenth century was romantic under the direct
influence of the ‘Great Romantics’ with some sprinkling of Indian material’” (Rukhaiyar 225).

In this connection, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) was the earliest of the Indian English poets. He is generally regarded as the father of Indian English poetry. An author of several beautiful lyrics, sonnets and long poems, Derozio’s “The Fakir of Jangheera” has a Byronic touch. In one of his lyrics “My Native Land”, he presents an interesting picture of the past and the present of India. His Sonnet, “Poetry” deals with his concept of poetic creation, just as it also reveals his romantic passionate love for nature. The influence of the Romantic poets on Derozio is evident in the choice of his themes such as melancholy, death, patriotism, love and escapism. Derozio’s poetic career ended with his death at the age of twenty three. After him comes Kashiprasad Ghose (1809 - 1873) who had a thorough knowledge of English prosody and versification. He is primarily known for his collection of poems *The Shair and other Poems* published in 1830.

After Derozio and Kashiprasad Ghose came a far more gifted poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1827-1873). He wrote two long poems, *The Captive Lady* and *Visions of Past* and a few lyrics and sonnets. In *The Captive Lady* published in 1849, he narrated the exploits of Prithviraj, closely imitating the style of some English poets. His other works include *Sarmista* (1859), *Ratnavali* (1858) and the farce, *Is this Called Civilization* (1871).

Torulata Dutt (1856-1877) is the most remarkable poet to emerge in Indian English literary circle between Derozio and Tagore. She studied French and English Literature with great interest and rendered French verses in English which appeared in 1875 under the title *A
Sheaf Gleaned in French Field which contained translations of 165 pieces, of which eight were done by Aru Dutt. Toru also brought out a collection of poems and Sanskrit stories. K.R.S. Iyengar points out: “She turned to Sanskrit… the mother of Muses, the deep spring of India’s racial memory… Now Toru could feel her feet on hospitable soil and satisfy the secret longing of her spirit for roots… Her Christian faith does not conflict with attraction, of addiction to the ‘deep’ magics of Hindu epics…” (63-64). By the autumn of 1876, she published A Sheaf Gleaned in Sanskrit Field, Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan and Savitri. The best of Toru Dutt’s works was Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan which was published in 1882. The volume contains a few personal poems too in a section called The Miscellaneous poems. “Our Casuarina Tree” belongs to this collection and it is one of her widely read poems. Srinivasa Iyengar says, “‘Our Casuarina Tree’ is a superb piece of writing, and gives us a taste of what Toru might have done had not the race of her life been so quickly run” (73). Thus despite touches of English Romanticism, Toru Dutt’s poetry represents a welcome change in so far as she put(s) the emphasis back on India” (Parthasarathy 1).

Toru Dutt might have been the last Romantic exile of Bengal, but at the end of the century came another lyrical poet Manmohan Ghose (1860-1924). He completed his studies in England and in Oxford where he made friends with the poets of the Decadent School, and had his poem included in Primavera (1890) which contained the works of Steven Philip and Arthur Cripps. His poems are colored by world-weariness, yearning, aestheticism of the 1890s. “Songs of Love and Death”, “Orphic Mysteries” and “Immortal Eve” are some of his great poems. India never inspired Ghose and he was rather an interpreter of the West to
India. To quote his friend Binyon: “No Indian has ever before used our tongue with so poetic a touch, and he could coin a phrase, turn a noun into a verb, with the freedom, often the felicity of our own poet” (21).

Unlike his brother Manmohan Ghose, Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) found his roots in Indian culture although he too studied in England. Aurobindo’s is a glorious chronicle of progress from patriot to poet, yogi to seer. As he set foot on the Indian soil “a feeling of the Infinite pervading material space and the Immanent inhabiting material objects and bodies” (Aurobindo 129) came to him and instead of the murky pall that had surrounded him while in England, “a vast calm descended upon him and remained with him for long months afterwards” (Sri Aurobindo 194).

Aurobindo’s poetic output is profound and large for it covers the period from 1890 to 1950. In his literary career he produced lyrics, narrative poems, large number of philosophical poems, poetic plays and translations. P.C. Kotoky, in his Survey of Indo-English Poetry, divided Aurobindo’s career into three phases. The early phase covers the poems written during his stay in England and Baroda (qtd in Mishra 14). The short poems (1890-1900) are mostly minor verses reflecting the glow of the romantic twilight of 1890’s. The short poems (1895-1908) written after his return to India strike a note of mystic awareness and it forms the middle phase. Then came his last phase during which he achieved sainthood and chose seclusion and retirement. His epic Savitri is the crowning achievement of this phase.
From Derozio onwards it was poetry which became the supreme medium of nineteenth century Indian English Literature. Interestingly, it was Bengal the first home of Indian English Literature that was to continue to dominate the poetic scene for many more years. Again it was Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a Bengali writer who gained for modern India a place in the world literary scene. The award of the Nobel Prize for *Gitanjali* was but the beginning of recognition to Indian English Literature on a global scale. His *Gitanjali* (1912) which, to use a cliché, took the literary world of London by storm was originally written in Bengali and then was translated into English. It was followed in quick succession by *The Gardener* (1913), *The Crescent Moon* (1913) and the Nobel Prize also came in the same year. *Gitanjali* is Tagore’s unique blend of romantic longing, devotion to God and simple love of created being.

The last of the romantic Indian English poets was Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949) who, like Toru Dutt, started writing English verse as a child. Sailing to England when sixteen, she studied at London and Cambridge. Here her poetic talents developed under the influence of the Rhymer’s Club, and the guidance and suggestion given by Arthur Symons and Edmund Gosse. It was Gosse who advised her to be a genuine Indian Poet and not a mere imitator of English Classics. In 1905, her first volume of poems, *The Golden Threshold* was published. In 1912, the second volume of verse entitled *The Bird of Time* appeared. The third volume, *The Broken Wing* followed in 1917. After 1917, she remained dormant for a long time and it was in 1961 that she made a come-back and the *Feather of the Dawn* was published, though posthumously. Sarojini Naidu wrote on a wide variety of themes including nature, man, love, death, and Indian myths. She is basically romantic in her approach and the term
“romantic” has been used with regard to her poems “in the sense of sentimental and highly stylized” (Pathak 26). But Sarojini Naidu remained unaffected by the modernist revolution associated with Pound, Yeats and Eliot. Eventually, at the request of Gandhi she dedicated her life to the nation, gradually moving away from the poet she was. M.K. Naik holds her poetic contribution in great esteem: “By winning recognition in England, she brought prestige to Indian writing long before Tagore received the Noble Prize; and her best poetry is not just a faded echo of the feeble voice of decadent romanticism, but an authentic Indian English lyric…” (A History of Indian English Literature 69).

Thus, the romantic strain in Indian English poetry continued till independence. In the Post-Independence era Indian English poetry took a fresh turn as it entered the ‘modern’ period. So far as the form is concerned, the great impact is of Walt Whitman, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Baudelaire. H.M. Williams, too, in his historical survey traces the impact of poets such as Eliot, Ezra Pound, Yeats, Auden and Dylan Thomas on the ‘new poets’. He comments that “in many cases the new poetry was generated by the acceptance of a new set of influences” (113). The attempts of the new poets, therefore, after 1945, have been to discover a new voice quite distinct from the old ones of Tagore, Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu. An overt declaration of such aims is found in Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry by P. Lal and K. Raghavendra Rao who rejected the earlier tradition completely and also proclaimed that Indian Romanticism ended with Sarojini Naidu. They affirmed “the necessity of poetry of the private voice especially because we live in an age that tends so easily to demonstration of mass approval and hysteria. For this reason we celebrate the lyric form as the best suited
for a capsule minded public” (viii). In 1958, P. Lal and his associates founded the Writers’ Workshop in Calcutta which soon became an effective forum for modernist poetry.

The new beginnings, therefore, represent a shift in allegiance from Post-Romantic to modern inclination. Now the question is not how well the Indian poet is able to use the English Language skillfully but how ‘Indian’ is his poem which translates his experience that is essentially Indian. To quote Bruce King: “English is no longer the language of colonial rulers, it is a language of modern India – which words and expressions have recognized national rather than imported significances and references, alluding to local realities, traditions and ways of feeling. Such Indianization has been proceeding for several generations…” (Three Indian Poets 3). This is evident in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel whose writings prove that India is a worthwhile subject for poetry. According to Inder Nath Kher, he is the explorer of “the ceaseless attempt of man and poet to define himself and find through all the ‘myth and maze’ a way to honesty and love” (152). A Time to Change (1952), The Sixty Poems (1960), The Third (1958), The Unfinished Man (1960), The Exact Name (1965), Hymns in Darkness (1976) are some of his remarkable contributions to Indian English poetry. “Renewal, desire, interest, women, poetry, prayer, wholeness, rightness, calm - these were to remain among Ezekiel’s concerns over the years although the specific framework or philosophy of life would alter to allow for fragmentation and the impossibility of bringing all the pieces of one’s self into harmony,” says Bruce King (35).

A parallel breakthrough came with the publication, of The Striders (1966) by A.K. Ramanujan. Ramanujan’s poems had a highly accomplished, understated precision and
economy of statement. He had evolved this style from his study of classical Kannada and Tamil verses and also of modern Kannada poets who blended Indian and European models into new forms. He showed that Indian poets could render poems by working within their own literary traditions. The poet admitted that “my first thirty years in India, my frequent visits and field trips, my personal and professional pre-occupations with Kannada, Tamil, the classics and folklore give my substance, my ‘inner forms’, images and symbols” (Parthasarathy 96). His precision of language and image and the conciseness of each line were highly praised by his contemporaries, Ezekiel and Parthasarathy.

In the meanwhile, Indian English Poetry witnessed another breakthrough when Kamala Das came on to the poetic scene with her works which revealed a greater pre-occupation with the self. According to Kamala Das, “One’s real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inward, will realize his route has no end” (My Story 109). Her poetry spoke with fierce and unsparing honesty about the difficulties of being a woman and a wife in a culture which had trained women to live in silence. Born in Malabar, she was educated mainly at home and turned early to poetry. She was bilingual and wrote in Malayalam too. Her books of poems are Summer in Calcutta (1965), The Descendants (1967), The Old Playhouse and other Poems (1973), and Collected Poems Vol.1 (1984). My Story (1975) is a frank account of her attitude towards life and art. Her poems express a sense of self which is alternatively sustained and thwarted by her own sexuality. In the words of Rajeev S. Patke “… there is no voice more direct in Indian Poetry in English. It shatters more careful into debris, offering simply the vulnerability of its own candor… The confessional aspect of her work has made
her seem like an Indian Sylvia Plath” (253-54). The direct, frank, personal mode of poetry in Indian English has its genesis in Das’ works. She encouraged a stream of fellow poets to adopt the confessional mode consequently in Indian English poetry.

The scrutiny of the self has taken various forms. Poets such as R. Parthasarathy and Arun Kolatkar, along with A.K. Ramanujan, are pre-occupied with the problem of roots. Their examination of Hindu ethos has given a new direction to their poetry. While Ramanujan conjures up early familial memories which recalls his childhood R. Parthasarathy probes his Hindu heritage. His *Rough Passage* (1977) is an attempt to deal with an identity impacted to two cultures – Indian and Western. In *Jejuri* Arun Kolatkar discloses “how Indo-Anglian poetry has finally established itself, ceased to commune solely with its strange, unrepresentative urban existence and has confronted the strange goals which sustain a forsaken people” (Bhabha 89).

In contrast to these poets rooted in Hindu tradition, a strong school of ethnic minorities has found its place in modern India. These poets explore and foreground the alienation-phenomenon in different ways: Nissim Ezekiel, hailing from the Bene-Israel community, which migrated to India generations ago, the three Parsi poets Adil Jussawala, Gieve Patel and K.N. Daruwalla, whose view of both Zoroastrianism and Hinduism is marked by skepticism tempered by a lively human curiosity, and Dom Moraes, a Goan Christian, who became a British citizen, a poet in whom the alienation is total. “The result of this feeling of alienation is turning completely inward, productive of a highly personal poetry, confessional in tone and obsessed with loneliness and insecurity from which escape is
sought either in the erotic fantasies of fertile imagination or the self probing of a tortured soul” (Iyer 37).

Cultural alienation need not be the only impulse behind the self probing poetry. The confessional mode which was already introduced by Kamala Das into the Indian English poetic scene seems to gain fresh ground with poets like Shiv K. Kumar, Mamta Kalia, Eunice De Souza and Silgardo. Shiv K. Kumar’s first collection of poems _Articulate Silences_ (1970) was followed by _Cobwebs in the Sun_ (1974) and _Subterfuges_ (1976). His intimate and personal descriptions of love, marriage and sex are similar to those of Kamala Das’s.

Mamta Kalia, who is known for her direct, ironic style, is a bilingual poet. She writes in both English and Hindi. Her two volumes of Poetry _Tribute to Papa and Other Poems_ (1970) and _Poems’78_ (1978) were published by the Writer’s Workshop. It was actually Nissim Ezekiel who encouraged her to publish her poems. Unfortunately she stopped writing in English after the publication of her second volume _Poems’78_, while she continues to write in Hindi. Relationships happen to be the hub of Mamta Kalia’s poetry. Unlike other confessional poets, Mamta Kalia does not cry aloud her personal history though the ‘I’ is predominantly seen all through her poems. In fact, the confessional, the familial and the social often blend in her poems and the personal is set within these contexts.

Most women poets of the 1980s and 1990s are equipped with a sharp intelligence and deep emotionality. They actively produce poems depicting the Indian woman’s situation. They approach their problems in different ways, by writing nature poems (Silgardo’s “Bird Broken”), by delineating the contemporary social situation (Tara Patel’s “In a Working
Women’s Hostel”), by exploring the feminine psyche (Lakshmi Kannan’s “Draupadi”) and by painting the local landscape (Imtiaz Dharker’s “The List”). These poets seek to convey authentic experiences more immediately in a contemporary idiom.

Women poets also employed the tone of confrontation as found in the works of Sujatha Bhatt, Sunita Jain, Meena Alexander, Lakshmi Kannan, Anuradha Marwah Roy and others. Most of their poems focus on contemporary issues related to women and gender. The poets speak out against social evils like female infanticide and feticide, dowry deaths, wife beating, prostitution and many other forms of sexual and social exploitation of women.

Thus, Indian-English Poetry has already established an identity for itself in world literature. Unlike their predecessors these poets do not slavishly imitate British or American poets nor do they write in an out-dated diction. The poetry of the 1950s and the 1960s focused on contemporary socio-political realities. The major shift in perspective was to focus on the poet’s inner life. Thus “there are identifiable periods when Indian poetry took new directions such as the focusing on the actuality of personal and family life by Kamala Das and Ezekiel in the early 1960s, or the experimental poetry of Mehoratra, Kolatkar, Nandy, Chitre and Mahapatra which began to appear in the later 1960s and early 1970s… With each decade an increasing immediacy and heightened awareness of actual Indian experience is noticeable” (King 16).
From the Puritan “Self” through the Transcendental “Self” to the Confessional “Self”:

The American search for selfhood in literature begins with the Puritans, with whom it had religious and moral overtones. Being exiled from the country of their birth for their religious affiliations created a conflict in them regarding their identity. This led to a probing examination of the self and God’s design for the self. Puritan literature is often preoccupied with interpreting the meaning of their arrival, struggles, aspirations and sufferings in America. The Puritans also examined their own self and the world around them constantly for a sign from God. This was a search for validation as God's chosen people. Puritan literature undertakes a thorough, inhibition-less examination of the moral and religious self in the presence of God and seeks redemption, transformation and emancipation of the mortal, sinful self through divine agency. Edward Taylor’s poem “Ebb and Flow” (*Norton Anthology* 161) records the transformation of the self effected by God within him:

But now my heart is made Thy censer trim,
Full of Thy golden altar's fire,
To offer up sweet incense in
Unto Thyself entire:
I find my tinder scarce Thy sparks can feel
That drop from out Thy holy flint and steel. (7-12)

The individual self is seen as limited – “I find my tinder scarce” – and is to be invigorated and expanded through the presence of God.
The Transcendentalists, who followed the Puritans, proposed a very different conception of the self. Their understanding of the Self was spiritual and mystical in nature. The Transcendental Self is beyond emotion, feeling, thought, intellect and even intuition. It is a Universal Self that goes beyond the dichotomies of subject and object, perceiver and perceived and experiencer and experienced. As it was discussed previously in the section which dealt with the American literary history, Emerson’s idea of “over soul” best represented the Transcendental Self. Unlike the Puritans who saw all too clearly the distinction between God and the Human soul and reaffirmed it vociferously in their literature, the Transcendentalists believed it was possible for the human soul to experience divinity within its Self. In his seminal essay “The Over-soul”, Emerson describes the transcendence of the human soul through the identification of the human and the divine thus:

“Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable. It inspires awe and astonishment. How dear, how soothing to man, arises the idea of God, peopling the lonely place, effacing the scars of our mistakes and disappointments! When we have broken our god of tradition and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence. It is the doubling of the heart itself, nay, the infinite enlargement of the heart with a power of growth to a new infinity on every side” (275).
It was with the publication of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* in 1959 that a new kind of poetry called “confessional poetry” – which brought yet another shift in the understanding of the self – was ushered into American Literature. Of the poetic styles that emerged in the late 1950s, the one to receive the widest acclaim was that which was known as “confessional”. The term “confessional” was not designated by the poets themselves nor did the poets constitute one conscious group, forming a group identity like the Imagists. The prominent poets associated with “the Confessional” mode were Robert Lowell, the acknowledged father of the movement, John Berryman, W.D. Snodgrass, Allen Ginsberg, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. The term was later applied by M.L. Rosenthal to describe a certain inward-moving tendency noticeable in the works of these poets in his influential work on contemporary British and American Literature, *The New Poets*. Thus, “confessional poetry owes its genesis to Lowell…” (Bloom 3).

The confessional poets have one characteristic in common. They, deal almost exclusively and intensely with the poet’s self. The “I” in the poems is no more the persona or the implied author; it is the poet’s real self, exposed in the most relentless and ‘consistent’ manner. The inward movement is not a metaphysical exploration of the inner space but a neurotic groping in the inner gloom. The “confessional self” was a purely individual, personal self, which suffered intense anguish and created poetry out of both the suffering and a probing of the suffering. The idea of aesthetic distance between the person who ‘suffers’ and the person who ‘creates’ is rejected. The boundary between the poet as a person and the poet as an artist almost disappears as the poet depicts the facts of his / her life in poetry.
Paul A. Lacey writes, “After a generation of criticism which insisted that the “I” of a poem was not to be identified with the writer, the real John Keats, T.S. Eliot, or W.B. Yeats, but was to be seen as a persona in the poem, we have returned – in some of our most vital poetry – to first-person utterances which are intended to be taken as autobiographical” (94). The innermost recesses of the poets soul are laid bare, the secrets of his/her heart expressed, and the frustrations of the psyche stated with a bewildering, sometimes frightening, candour. Lowell talks of his alcoholism, his secret guilts and neurosis; Theodore Roethke of his illness and the nagging awareness of the proximity of death; John Berryman of his divided self; Anne Sexton of her journey to Bedlam and back; Sylvia Plath of her mental disturbances and frustrations. All these poets suffered from a nervous breakdown sometime or the other. Sylvia Plath, John Berryman and Anne Sexton committed suicide. One may say that these poets were determined to confront the intimations of mortality, not of immortality. The critic Alvarez calls their poetry an “Extremist Art”. As he puts it: “The concept of extremism is the result of the overtly confessional attitude of the poets who very often suffered from mental imbalance. The reason for such an outspokenness and fragmentation of the poet is to be found not only in the psycho-biographical life of the poet but also in the extraordinary socio - political order of the post-war world, especially in America” (39). The poet is, in this mode of poetry, is not a man speaking to men where both the speaker and the listener share the same platform. The universe from which the poet derives his/her experiences, far from being universal, is rooted in personal chaos. And this break from the complacency of familiarity creates a new aesthetics of anguish, horror and insanity.
Wallace Stevens has said “As life grows more terrible, its literature grows more terrible” (*The Confessional Poets* 2). Susan Sontag in her long essay, “Illness as Metaphor” argues that insanity has come to symbolize the predicament of the writer in the twentieth century (27). The world depicted in the works of these writers is nothing but a reflection of the inner fractured psyche. Most of the confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s, have at one time or the other, suffered a mental breakdown. In one of her letters, Anne Sexton has said: “As for madness… hell! Most poets are mad” (*Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* 267). Ginsberg begins his poem “Howl” saying: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness” (1). Rosenthal says, “Confessional poetry is a poetry of suffering. The suffering is generally ‘unbearable’ because the poetry so often projects breakdown and paranoia. The psychological condition of most of the confessional poets has long been the subject of common literary discussion. A heightened sensitivity to the human predicament in general,… has led to a sharper sense.. of the pain of existence” (qtd in *Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetry* 65). This idea is further established by the fact that Sylvia Plath, Randal Jarrell, John Berryman and Anne Sexton took their lives.

A.R. Jones defined the confessional poem as “a dramatic monologue in which the persona is ‘naked’ ego involved in a very personal world and with particular, private experiences” (14). It does not mean that whatever is depicted by a confessional poet has happened in her real life though “the confessional poems put the speaker himself at the center of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization” (Rosenthal 79). But the writer–persona relation is not that simple. Anne Sexton’s “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” is a brilliant example of
using the first person ‘I’. The poem is about having an illegitimate child and having to give it away. This poem led many critics to believe that Sexton herself had a third child outside of wedlock, but it is not true. Sexton revealed to Paulin: “… as a matter of fact, I had met a girl in a mental hospital who had just done this and I was projecting. I was fictionalizing, but, of course, I mean, so-called confessing” (The New Poets 133-134). Thus, the “persona” is not always merely the poet; the poetic self expands to envelope experiences of other women as well, and indeed, those of all womanhood. Confessional poetry, therefore, is a strange mix of the real and the imaginary. Anne Sexton clarifies,

Poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical. It is truth that goes beyond the immediate self, another life. I don’t adhere to literal facts all the time. I make them up whenever needed … I would alter any word, attitude, image or persona for the sake of a poem… I believe I am many people. When I am writing a poem, I feel I am the person who should have written it, … when I wrote about the farmer’s wife, I lived in my mind in Illinois; when I had the illegitimate child, I nursed it - in my mind - and gave it back and traded life. When I was Christ, I felt like Christ. My arms hurt, I desperately wanted to pull them off the cross (George 89).

Writers, while writing about their lives, write about only those experiences that go to build up an integrated pattern.

As a rule, autobiographies are utterly conventional and common place: They are of interest only to those readers who are immediately concerned with the author. But some others appeal because the personal element in them has universal application and the reader can easily identify himself with the writer, feel his pain, rejoice in his
pleasure and share with him the hope that lies indomitable in the human heart (Jaidka 2).

Of course, there is also a long tradition of writers through the ages, who have treated the self as the primary subject matter of poetry. There have been early analogues to the contemporary confessional poetry. Yet they did not deal with private and taboo subjects which have been explored with utmost candor by Robert Lowell or Anne Sexton.

Augustine’s *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *The Confessions* and Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* have always been of great interest to critics of all ages. St. Augustine addressed himself to the basic questions such as the cause of sin, the reality of evil and the nature of faith. The Confessions of Rousseau set off a new trend in literary writing where the truth, the innermost truth, is expressed. Thus, autobiography becomes a search of the true self, a means of affirming one’s existence. “Any identity quest can bring painful revelations, as Oedipus the King found out” (Rosenthal 65). In his journeys to the interior Roethke searches for an identity and probes the various complexities of the self. He sees himself split up into conflicting forces and wonders which part of him is his true self. This is a common concern among the confessional poets for the obvious reason that their main concern is themselves. Roethke says, “Sometimes I think I’m several, and wonder, “which I is I?” (Jaidka 83).

Further, down the history of English Literature one cannot forget the impact of Romanticism whose chief practitioner happens to be William Wordsworth. Wordsworth’s “The Prelude,” to cite another major example, is the spiritual autobiography of the poet. In
fact, “The Prelude” is one of the first attempts to focus attention on a truly private universe. “The incident of stealing a boat, for example, is confession in the same sense that Augustine’s account of stealing pears is confession. But the incidents described are not “taboo”, there is not the sense of descent into the underworld that seems almost a definite characteristic of modern confessional poetry” (Malkoff 27). Moreover, the Romantics always assumed that they could use the sense of their unique experiences to comment upon more general emotions and thoughts. As Rosenthal says,

They found … cosmic equations and symbols, transcendental reconciliations with ‘this lime - tree bower my prison’, or titanic melancholia in the course of which, merging a sense of tragic fatality with the evocations of the Nightingale’s song, the poet lost his personal complaint in the music of universal forlornness (Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist 65).

Thus, confessional poetry fuses the romantic with the realistic mode, and it is Lowell’s “superb manipulation of the realistic convention, rather than the titillating confessional content, that is responsible for the so-called break through of Life Studies”. Lowell’s “metonymic structure is far from artless” and “the style born of this ‘fusion’ of metonymic realism with the “Romantic lyrical ‘I’ … marks a turning point in the history of twentieth century,” says Marjorie G. Perloff (86-89). Thus, confessional poetry is a modern manifestation of a continuing tradition.
From the Romantic “Self” through the Mystical “Self” to the Confessional “Self”:

With the spread of European humanistic and democratic thought, a new awareness of man’s identity and similar modernist social, political and psychological trends created a profound change in the Indian psyche and also gave Indians a new tongue to express this change in. The first phase of Indian English Writing, especially in poetry, was an imitative one which led critics to term it “parasitic” (Naik), though Indian Literature in itself had a rich literary tradition. During this phase, the most significant influence on Indian English poets was that of the British Romantics. Poets such as Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu wrote poetry which was predominantly romantic in content and form. V.K. Gokak observes that, “Indo-Anglian poetry was born under a Romantic star. It learnt to lisp in the manner of Byron and Scot. In the verse of Derozio, M.M. Dutt and others. It began with verse romances and lyrics written in the Romantic vein” (19). As a result, an infinite “self” with limitless possibilities was created in their poetry. This self was characterized by an urge to soar away from a world of weariness, fret and fever into the escape offered by the aesthetic realm. An example of this flight of fancy can be found in Toru Dutt’s “Our Casuarina Tree”, in which the casuarina tree becomes the Indian counterpart of the Keatsian nightingale:

…beneath the moon,

When earth lay trancèd in a dreamless swoon:

And every time the music rose,—before

Mine inner vision rose a form sublime,

Thy form, O Tree, as in my happy prime

I saw thee, in my own loved native clime. (39-44)
This Romantic, idealized self gave way to the mystical self of Tagore and Aurobindo. The mystical self, unlike the romantic self, did not seek to escape or fly away from the harsh realities of life; rather it seeks to delve within to explore the one universal interiority. This is achieved not by rejecting the world but by a shift in perception whereby the world is seen within, as in Aurobindo’s poem “Transformation”:

I am no more a vassal of flesh,
A slave to Nature and her leaden rule;
I am caught no more in the senses’ narrow mesh.
My soul unhorizoned widens to measureless sight,
My body is God’s happy living tool,
My spirit a vast sun of deathless light. (9-14)

The next shift came with the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel, R Parthasarathy and A.K. Ramanujan who wrote of a divided self. Of the three, Nissim Ezekiel’s was a shaping influence in Indian English poetry. Though his poetry is not confessional in its mode, as aspects of confessionalism, especially an intense soul-searching, can be seen in his work, as, for example, in “Background Casually”. Bruce King observes, this is “a verse autobiography tracing what Ezekiel saw as the main stages of his life to date” (Modern Indian Poetry in English 100).

The poets mentioned above spoke of a self that is torn apart by the conflict between its Indian roots and its English upbringing. This conflict was reflected in their struggle to
express their Indianness in an alien tongue. As Keki Daruwalla observes in his “The De-Colonised Muse: A Personal Statement”, “Exiles come to alien shores and write in the language of their adopted country. Joseph Conrad, Arthur Koestler, Nabokov are examples. An Indian writing poetry in English was an exile in his own country” (Daruwalla). A sense of alienation and a search for roots thus created often finds expression in their verse. In the section on exile in R. Parthasarathy’s “Rough Passage” (Rough Passage: Poetry in English 75) this idea finds expression:

He had spent his youth whoring
after English gods.

There is something to be said for exile:

you learn roots are deep.

that language is a tree, loses colour
under another sky. (22-27)

While the divided self for the male poet had to do with national identity closely linked to linguistic identity, for the female poets, beginning from Kamala Das, it had to do with gender and personal identity. Kamala Das, in her poem “An Introduction” (The Norton Anthology 2126) gives this issue a different turn. Dismissing the diasporic consciousness, which problematizes the use of the English language for creative expression, Das justifies the linguistic choice on purely personal terms:

…Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human, don’t
You see? It voices my joys, my longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as cawing
Is to crows or roaring to the lions, it
Is human speech, the speech of the mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees and hears and
Is aware… (9-20) (italics mine)

The prolific presence of the first person pronoun is in marked contrast to Parthasarathy’s use of the second and the third person pronouns and paves the way for the confessionalist mode to set in. Confessionalism is thus ‘grammatized’ in Kamala Das’ context. Further, while personal emotions which were hitherto considered unnatural in genuine poetry is here naturalized through the phrase “it is useful to me as cawing/Is to crows, rebellion, with reference to both the personal and the social context, is also legitimimized through the phrase “roaring to the lions”.

The women poets who followed Kamala Das such as Eunice De Souza, Mamta Kalia, Kavita Ezekiel, Tara Patel, Charmayne De Souza, Melanie Silgado, draw from both the male and the female traditions. Many of these women poets felt comfortable writing in the
confessional strain introduced by Kamala Das, just as Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959) introduced the confessional mode in American Poetry.

Kamala Das is the first Indian English poet to boldly declare that “A poet’s raw material is not stone or clay, it is her personality” (*My Story* 165). E.V. Ramakrishnan places her in the lineage of “Lowell, Plath, Sexton, Roethke, Berryman, and Ginsberg” (202). It would be far more appropriate to trace her roots back even further in Indian ‘bhakti’ tradition identifying her specially with Mahadevi Akka, Andal, and Mira Bai, owing to her use of the Radha - Krishna myth to speak of the woman’s quest for the eternal even as Sarojini Naidu has done it earlier in her last book of poems *The Broken Wing*. The poetry of all these women Bhakti poets was deeply rooted in personal emotion as they sought to merge their individual self into the divine self, thus personalizing their relationship with the divine.

To trace this Indian roots further, it may be appropriate to refer to G.N.Devy’s discussion, in *In Another Tongue*, of how autobiographical or personal writings were alien to Indian literary tradition though biographical narration was one of the prime motivations behind the two great Indian Epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabarata*. According to G.N.Devy “the Indian artists had practiced, very scrupulously, a policy of self-effacement” (81) and it was actually the thousand years of Islamic rule in India that gave rise to obliquely autobiographical writings. Thus, in the works of several saint-poets like Basava, Allamma, Chaitanya, Mira, Kabir, Tulsidas and Narasi Mehta, one finds the autobiographical tendency in ample degree though the result was ego-sublimation and not ego-celebration. “The fashion of being self-conscious as an artist is a gift of the British colonial rule to Indian
Under the impact of English education, Indian writers imported individualism as a literary value from the poetry of Wordsworth and Shelley …” (81). He also says that Gandhi’s autobiography, *Satyana Prayog*, written originally in Gujarati and later translated into English as *My Experiments with Truth* “succeeds because of Gandhi’s adoption of an impersonal attitude towards his life” (82).

Devy comes down heavily upon Indian English writers like Aurobindo, Parthasarathy and Jayanta Mahapatra for having treated autobiography as a description of a state of mind, rather than an examination of a finished experience. He also adds that “the necessary aesthetic distancing does not take place … Nor do they seem to be aware of autobiography as a socially significant act” (86). In connection with this, Devy finds fault with Kamala Das too, for having followed the models set by Sylvia Plath’s confessional poetry because Plath has her social context set in Western culture, while a classical Indian model is available in Mira’s poems.

The accusation of Devy’s is one-sided as he has not fully realized the power of the traditionally bottled-up feelings of a woman who was only waiting for an outlet – for, in the name of culture and tradition, patriarchy reigned supreme. Free expression of the heart’s desires was forbidden, especially for a woman and it needed a Kamala Das to break all these conventional norms and to portray a hassle-free feminine sensibility in her poems. It should also be noted that her frank explorations into the themes of love, marriage and sex were totally new and her voyage into such aspects of life could be read as an attack on patriarchy and to an extent on Indian culture which observes different codes of conduct for a man and a
woman respectively. Therefore, she naturally cannot depend on the Indian model of Mira alone, as Devy points out, and has to go beyond India. Also, when the situation warrants she has used, for example, the Indian Radha-Krishna myth to talk about the significance of her union with her husband finally. Kamala Das, thus, draws upon both Indian and Western traditions and evolves her own brand of confessionalism incorporating elements from both traditions. As Vilas Sarang says, “Let the poet be himself. By being himself, the poet, in fact, contributes to the definition of defined, after all in terms of what Indians are” (7).

Kamala Das was preoccupied with the themes of love, lust, frustration, and death just as her fellow American confessional poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were. Her intention of writing such confessional poems is made clear in the following lines: “... by confessing / by peeling off my layers / I reach closer to the soul” (The Descendants 136-200). She writes, “I have been for years obsessed with the idea of death. I have come to believe that life is a mere dream and that death is the only reality. It is endless, stretching before and beyond our human existence. To slide into it will be to pick up a new significance” (My Story 218). On several occasions death appeared to her as an easy escape from the loneliness of life. To the confessional poets, death – both literal and metaphorical – is the only divinity. The idea of suicide which haunted the American confessionals hovered over the life of Kamala Das too: “Often I have toyed with the idea of drowning myself to be rid of my loneliness which is not unique in anyway but is natural to all. I have wanted to find rest in the sea and an escape from involvements” (My Story 215). Suicide is an act of announcing the dissent by willful extinction of physical survival so that the spirit of dissent would be heard ever after.
It is to be conceded though that one does not find any trace of mental breakdown as experienced by American confessional poets; yet it will not be an exaggeration to say that Kamala Das modified the confessional mode to suit her needs within the framework of Indian English poetry for her social context “is and will remain, however, Indian” (Devy 84). It is true that her choice of words and expressions such as “menstrual blood”, “the musk of sweat”, “schizophrenia”, “eczema” etc. came as a shock to the conventional academics in India for it happens to be the first instance such words have been used in Indian Poetry in English. Nevertheless “Das’s Indianness manifests itself in the context and flavor of her poetry, rather than in her unconventionality” (Mendis 138). Thus, it is beyond doubt that Kamala Das represents “the most significant stage of the development of Indian feminine poetic sensibility” (Chavan 60).

The confessional mode allured several other women poets such as Mamta Kalia, Sunita Jain, Lalitha Venkateshwaran and several others. Kamala Das influenced many younger contemporaries who continued the tradition of writing poems in the confessional mode. One such poet is Mamta Kalia. Mamta Kalia, like Kamala Das, is bilingual as she writes in both English and Hindi. She has published two volumes of poetry, *Tribute to Papa and other poems* and *Poems’ 78* (1978) but she stopped writing in English although she continues to write in Hindi.

Mamta Kalia is almost as subjective as Kamala Das is in her free and frequent use of “I” in almost all her poems. Writing, for her, is the only mode of self-expression:

In my hour of discontent
I neither shout nor rant.
I simply fill ink in my pen
And spill it with intent. (Poems ’78 17)

Yet, “her poetry marks a departure from the confessionalism of Kamala Das Surayya and moves toward a more confident idiom that is born out of a compulsive need to capture the ordinariness of an uneventful life” (Six Women Poets: A Cross Cultural Study 167-168).

Similarly, the other interesting difference between Kamala Das and Mamta Kalia is “while the ‘I’ of Kamala Das is largely in romantic agony, that of Mamta Kalia dwells amid irony” (Jha 237). She criticizes the conventional image of a woman as domestic angel vehemently in her poems and just as any other confessional poet she too writes on the theme of man-woman relationship.

Mamta Kalia’s ironical use of ‘I’ becomes cryptic and bitter in Eunice de Souza and her self-expression is completely bare, stripped off all gloss and glamor. Sunita Jain, who too belongs to the tradition of confessional poets, deals with the theme of love, betrayal, marriage, frustration, etc., like Kamala Das does. The list also includes women poets such as Shree Devi, Margaret Chatterjee, Sunita Namjoshi and Gauri Deshpande. Sharad Rajimwale, in his essay Kamala Das Need for Re-Assessment, says that Kamala Das was joined by these women poets only “after a few hesitations” (Feminist English Literature 6) for the reception is far from encouraging as the confessional mode facilitated a direct confrontation with reality in all its brutality and ugliness. But when Kamala Das sings, “I have no joys which are not yours / no aches which are not yours, I too call myself I” (“An Introduction” ll 60-
the invitation is irresistible and, therefore, today Indian English poetry has several young women poets who have embraced the confessional mode initiated by Kamala Das.